

# *Sketch*

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*Volume 75, Number 2*

2011

*Article 12*

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## The Life Ectopic

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# The Life Ectopic

Corrie Byrne

When Evans died at fifty five, the doctor was trying to set his broken leg. One gelatinous speck of bone marrow leaked into his blood stream and swam into his brain. The moment of his death was the moment for which he had been searching, and yet hanging back from, his entire life; relief poured out of him, flooding rivers of contentment onto the floor of the operating room. The doctor and nurses jumped back in horror, their palms up, flickering cause to effect, excuse after excuse, bending their words so that they wouldn't be blamed for this man who lay there smiling.

Evans broke his leg tripping down the stairs where a shoe had been displaced, left on the landing by his housemate, The Chinese Man, Jeow-Long (and sometimes Tung Pin, Evans was still not quite sure). Evans had been working with the Trans Alaskan pipeline, which took oil from the top of Alaska at Prudhoe Bay down to the Bay of Valdez where it would be loaded onto massive ships and sent around the world, for the past twenty one years. He was not a chief engineer.

It was Jeow-long/Tung Pin's shoe on the landing in a house just outside of Fairbanks. The two lived together but didn't speak to each other much. The Russian, Mischa, had been the only one who could translate between them but he was dead of cancer three years. Jeow-Long/Tung Pin had been in love with Mischa, although he hadn't ever said anything, and resented having to live with Evans without Mischa around to translate and smooth relations.

For the last ten years Evans collected white orchids. He didn't earn much from the pipeline but what he did earn went into giant lights and bags of fertilizer. He had a complex system including many circuit boards to water each orchid at exactly the right time that Mischa had helped him set up. Every once in a while Evans would kill all the orchids because, although he had almost stopped thinking about Roy, who died in Vietnam thirty years ago and whose bones were still buried there, he hadn't forgotten him either. Evans felt guilty and cruel for forcing the orchids to suffer in a land not their own. His flowers might have a sweetheart, a mother, a baby, growing in the Amazon rainforests, alone and bereft. He knew he was cruel for keeping them separate, and reasoned that death was the only way the orchid families could be together again. He saw their plight: they were cold, the air was too dry. Their leaves perpetually wilted and they never looked like the pictures said they would. Still, he could only ever go six months after a killing before

he bought another one and repopulated the bathroom he had commandeered for the purpose.

Before Mischa's death, Mischa had thought Evans was probably gay because he had never seen Evans with a woman. He didn't suspect his friend, Jeow-Long, of unrequited feelings because Jeow-Long was loud and obnoxious, whereas sometimes he could hear Evans in the bathroom, over the roar of the TV, singing to his flowers to counteract the cold. Mischa, himself, carried bitterness around too fully to notice whether or not Jeow-Long was in love with him or not. In Mischa's mind all three of them were friends, although he liked Jeow-Long better than Evans, because Evans was probably gay and Mischa felt slightly uncomfortable with that. Plus, Jeow-Long was loud and obnoxious and cooked breakfast while ranting about various injustices. He made Mischa laugh.

Evans ate his breakfast in the bathroom with the flowers. He thought the flowers favored Johnny Cash. Evan's roommates never told him that when each was alone in the house they sometimes went into the bathroom to sing to the flowers too. They stood in the tiny room, orchids and lights covering every inch of space, there was even a pot in the toilet, cradled by the seat and half submerged in water, and crooned out lullabies in their native tongue. Sometimes they sang Elvis or the Beatles, translated, of course.

The first year they lived in the house with two bathrooms it became clear to Evans that his roommates had some sort of emotional connection, like Roy and Inez, that Evans couldn't touch. He never said anything about how sometimes Mischa and Jeow-Long/Tung-Pin watched movies together and he clearly wasn't invited, or how sometimes the men fell asleep on the same couch, or how Jeow-Long made enough breakfast for Mischa but not for Evans. He never once thought that either of his roommates were gay, or more than friends, but he never tried to get between them, either.

Their house was closer in to town, so Evans spent a lot less time at the oil field, which he sometimes missed. In the winter, he missed how hot the oil was; it pulsed the air as it was spun out from the center of the earth like an umbilical cord from a woman's body. The teams of men assembled at the top of the world were drawing the blood out, sucking life from the living, and in the winter Evans could feel each hand tugging, pulling, forcing the oil out in long, black rivers. In the winter, until he got his first orchid, all Evans knew was the black oil and the white snow, and this was somehow comforting to him.

They hadn't always lived in a house with two bathrooms. Originally they'd lived in a bunker. When the Jeow-Long and Mischa were ready to leave

the bunker they had lived in for the first five years of their work in Alaska, they moved Evans along with them. They left a note telling Evans what was happening but it fell under the bed. Originally they had been planning on leaving Evans in the bunker by himself, but Mischa thought about how Evans had stopped throwing up whenever he saw oil, and now he was working the same as anyone--dirty job or clean job--so he convinced Jeow-Long (who Evans never referred to by name) to look for a three bedroom house, despite Jeow-Long's odd reluctance. On the day of the move Evans came back from work to find all of his things missing. Evans asked the foreman if he had seen anyone making off with his stuff and the foreman said, "Aren't you three moving?" Evans, for a moment, thought the foreman meant himself, Roy and Inez, or maybe himself, Inez and the baby. Then he remembered Mischa and Jeow-Long/Tung Pin.

Alaska suffered from magnetic storms, which knocked out power and electrical equipment. The night could be perfectly still, except the Aurora Borealis swimming around in the air above, but all the lights and computers would flicker, going crazy, if not shut down completely. The camps and the buildings ran on oil generators because it was too dangerous to go without heat.

Once, Evans was in the radio room during one of the storms because his bunker was half way across camp and he'd forgotten a flashlight so he ducked into the radio room. The TV shut off and all the men filed out to the bar or canteen, which had a generator. Evans stayed and sat staring at the blank screen. After a while an Inuit man who monitored the telephone lines put headphones on him and let him listen to the whistles, croons and cackles that were causing all the commotion. The sounds lulled Evans almost into a sleep like state until the Inuit man shook him and said, "It's said by some of the elders that the lights are caused by the sun shining off the coats of our ancestors, who are waiting to be born again. Spare souls. And they're all playing baseball up there. Yelling and screaming. What do you think, eh?" His eyes leered forward. "Like ghosts--'cept these can climb back down and crawl into any baby they want. Creepy, huh? Gives you the willies. The Laborers think they fuck with the electric on purpose." He made a ghost noise and waved his fingers a little bit. The Inuit man felt comfortable in Evans' presence because Evans never seemed to condemn or judge anyone, but Evans got a flush of heat in his cheeks when the Inuit man spoke to him. His eyes got wide and his throat burned. There were three souls up there looking for him, Roy, Inez and the baby. Evans took the headphones off. "Thanks," he said, and made some excuse to leave, to escape into the cold.

The first time he saw the real lights, in Alaska, he thought of his first memory, seeing giant spot lights going round and round, searching for answers in the sky. There had been a time when he had wanted, with the most intense feelings he had ever had, as a child, to see the Aurora Borealis, to be so close he could touch it, taste it. Even now there was that yearning, the feeling of his chest stretching out beyond him as he looked at the shimmers and waves of the antediluvian light. He still had that feeling but now his heart sped up, his palms moistened, and his stomach burned. The panic stopped when he went inside. The Inuit man's words remained with him his whole life. He felt that he'd known about this all along.

The two men he lived with, The Russian, Mischa and The Chinese man, Jeow-Long/Tung Pin, were not Laborers. They were Operators, like him, which meant they drank beer like water. It was known that the operators preferred beer just as the Teamsters all snorted coke and the Laborers were conspiracy theorists.

Evans had lived with The Russian, Mischa, and The Chinese Man, who was both Jeow-Long and Tung-Pin, since his first week in Alaska. They were his assigned roommates when the project started and twenty eight thousand men had bee-lined north like a gold rush. They had stayed roommates after everyone left and there was only maintenance work to be done.

Evans sometimes drank beers with the two of them after coming back from the pump stations or after the grueling days welding the pipe together in the wind that took his fingers off and froze his beard. Evans couldn't shave the beard because it was too cold without it, but he covered it with a scarf unless it was thawed. Uncovered it froze into white tangles like ocean foam.

The Russian said that warm weather made him itch. He wanted to live in America but even here, in fucking Alaska, it was too warm. His face relaxed when he spoke of Siberia and his mother's gruzdianka, a milk mushroom stew, but in the next breath his eyes turned hard and he grabbed another beer. "All of Russia are criminals," he said, "all of them, criminals. At seven o'clock every night they begin shooting. Seven o'clock. They ask a man for fifty thousand dollars by midnight the next day, but that man doesn't even own a house. How can he pay fifty thousand dollars?" Mischa asked this question all the time. "How can he pay fifty thousand dollars?"

Evans never knew what to say to those things but the Chinese man, who was better friends with The Russian, just clumped his hand on The Russian's arm and made a joke in an English so hard to understand that

it was another language all together. The Russian laughed and they forgot Evans sitting right next to them, content to speak this new language together and make up half of it as they went along. As they got drunker their English improved, which was why Evans sometimes waited out the several hours of relative sobriety before the two of them got piss roaring drunk and started using the grammar lessons and pronunciation guides in the English handbooks stuffed under their beds. It was during one of these drunken nights that The Chinese Man opened his chest and screamed, in the middle of the bar, “I am Tung Pin! My Son is the Emperor!” Evans gathered from that evening that there were also dragons and magic swords involved, from the Russian’s interpretation of breathing fire and The Chinese Man’s fencing poses. Evans never saw a son or a dragon, and definitely not a magic sword, and had to decide for himself that the Chinese man might be making them up. He only knew the man by the name Tung-Pin, and never allowed himself to call him as such in case it wasn’t actually true.

But when the men were sober they ignored him, even though they slept in the same trailer, because Evans had washed out lips and washed out hair and no laugh wrinkles in his eyes. The Russian had decided that Evans did not think Americans were better than everyone else, despite their first impression of him, but Evans didn’t seem to like him all that much either. The Russian had seen Evans getting sick, coughing up his breakfast and not complaining about it.

Jeow-long didn’t like Evans because a week after they had met he had asked Evans, in perfect English—reading from the damned book, “What time is it?” Evans had looked at him with that look that Americans get when asked a simple question in their own language. Jeow-long had repeated himself, over and over, getting louder and louder and eventually the white man had stuffed his head under his pillow. The Russian threw his watch across the room, hitting Jeow-long in the back of the head. “Three in the morning, you fucking dog eater!” he had cried. Jeow-long liked the filthy Russian because at least he spoke plain English and told a man when it was three o’clock in the morning.

The first winter he spent in Alaska, Evans often wandered around the oil refinery on his time off, or the pump station. He wandered into areas he didn’t normally see. He loved the feeling of the oil coming out of the earth but he shuddered at it too, fascinated but repulsed at the same time. In the winter he liked the idea that they were bringing energy to the masses, but in the summer he thought taking oil from the ground was disgusting. In the winter there was only black sky and white snow and black oil.

His new roommates, one who was Chinese and the other who was Russian, saw how he vomited and had to be given jobs where he didn't have to directly touch or see oil. There were plenty of jobs like that, but the Chinese man and the Russian privately thought the American was trying to foist dirty jobs onto everyone else. They had all been put into a processing room together, but Evans had seen a drip of dark, rolling oil come out from a crack and had backed away.

The first summer, when he first arrived, the thought of the oil and the sky wracked his diaphragm into seizures which made him vomit. When he was vomiting all he tried to focus on was the oil, how it kept flowing, deluging out in great waves, until it covered everything and the body it came from died, right there, on the operating table. He tried not to think about Inez or Roy, but he couldn't help himself, and that made the vomiting worse. Once there was an oil spill in the pump station where he worked and everything he touched was slick and viscous and even now he could feel it on the tips of his fingers. In the summer there was so much to contend with-- birds and elk and wildflowers. Summer didn't last long, and he stopped going outside after the first couple of weeks, which helped.

Evans got the work putting in the Trans-Alaskan Pipeline as a young man. He had not been there when oil was discovered at Prudhoe bay; he came when the camps started burgeoning towards tens and thousands of men. They built the initial refinery at Prudhoe, the massive pumps and generators to get the oil over several mountains and across Alaska, and connected it all with pipeline on stilts so that the heat from the oil didn't melt the perma-frost below. Once the pipe line was built he helped maintain pump station number two. On his work report it said he worked at pump station eleven, but pump station eleven had never been built so he worked at pump station two.

The last time Evans let himself actually dwell on the thought of bones and blood was the day Evans saw the ad for workers in Alaska. He left Texas a month later. He took a bus in. He slept the whole way there and when they finally stepped out at a rest station he found a sky so blue it cut into the flesh of his eyes, and a wind that rushed through the cuts, making him tear up. He never looked into the day sky again.

Before Evans found the ad for workers in Alaska, a hurricane came along and washed the graves of his wife and baby out to sea. Evans had buried them on a hill looking out into the gulf of Mexico. He thought they

might like it there, several hours from the town he and Inez had grown up and settled down in, but it turned out they wanted to be further away from him than even that.

Evans buried them along the coast not just for the view, but also because sometimes he imagined the blood of Inez and the baby creeping along the floor, reaching towards him, running up walls and around corridors, boarding planes, slinking under the ocean, landing in the tropical hell that Roy had died in, sliding their way inland and finally soaking into the soil that had held Roy's bones. Evans imagined the whole planet covered in Inez's blood, searching for Roy. In the Texas humidity he could barely breathe, imagining he was breathing Inez's blood in the air, and he buried her as close to Roy and as far from him as he could manage.

Inez died in the summer, in the hospital, trying to give birth to a child who had been growing for only five months. Evans was not in the room but he was watching the surgery because he was quiet and no one noticed him sneak in with his scrubs and facemask over to the window in the door. Inez didn't make any noise of her own at all. He watched as the doctor cut into her stomach and pulled out the baby, already dead, and the umbilical cord, a long, red rope, snaking into her body. Then there was even more blood, spilling onto the table and the onto the floor.

Later the doctor looked at Evans and told him there was nothing to be done, the child was ectopic, had grown not inside the womb but outside, attached to the bladder, placenta and all, and that those types of pregnancies never survive.

"But I survived." Evans said.

"Pardon?"

"I was—what is it—ectopic? too. But I. I lived."

"You shouldn't have." The doctor was a religious man and meant his statement to highlight the miraculous and divine, but Evans took it as condemnation instead.

The woman to whom he had been married, Inez, had adorable lips that curved in and out. Her hair was so blond it was almost white, though she swore she didn't dye it. Inez loved him in her own way but she loved Roy, a school friend of his who had died in the war, much more. After word came back to her about Roy, that he had been wounded and then swarmed by ants that ate him clear to the bone, she married Evans, to somehow stay connected to Roy. She thought that if Roy, in the afterlife, could see her having sex with his friend he would be both jealous and pleased in a pitying sort of way. She always liked getting a reaction out of the men she dated, which was why Evans was such a bad match for her, since he never reacted



to anything.

Inez moved into their house a month before she and Evans had married, but he had stayed living with his Aunt and Uncle, his guardians, until the actual ceremony. His Aunt was impatient to see him out of the house and kept telling him that while he shouldn't consummate the marriage before the Pastor got to the altar, what was the harm in Evans sleeping on the couch for a month? She didn't seem to mind if he went to hell. But Evans insisted, by simply not packing and despite Inez's and his Aunt's objections, that he remain in his childhood bedroom for those last couple of weeks.

His Aunt had always told him in her southern drawl that he was sick and probably wouldn't live out the year. She had been saying that forever. He always made it back around to Christmas, though, so when he was seventeen his uncle decided he was strong enough for a job and got him one painting houses. At first it was just in the summer, but after he graduated he started doing it all year. All the developments being built in their area were part of neighborhood associations and had to look the same, so Evans spent ten years painting white vinyl white. His aunt thought white was a waste of space. Every surface in her home was some burst of color, and she made him strip his painting clothes off outside before coming in the house so he wouldn't get flecks anywhere. He worked outside all day and wore long sleeves so his body was as pale as the paint. His face was flushed from the sun like one of his aunt's chairs.

Somehow Evans had always wanted to go to Alaska; it was in one of those pink flushed chairs that he got his first glimpses of the ice and mountains, so different from Texas. His aunt had been in a bookstore and been enchanted with the front cover of a coffee table book, "Alaskan Wilderness," and in order to have it in the house for herself she had bought it for Evans. He was only twelve and had heard of Alaska in geography class. Still, he pored over the grainy photographs, tracing the lines with his fingers. He always wondered what the colors would be like—photographs could never capture it. Evans wanted to go to Alaska so that he could look at the whole sky at once.

His younger self looked upwards all the time—at the clouds, finding shapes and imagining himself floating inside them. He was the type of boy who could twist his feet a hundred and eighty degrees to the inside so his toes looked backwards. This wasn't the best way to make friends and many of the kids decided he was a freak. Inez, in grade school, was the worst. She

liked to saunter up to him in the playground, fill him with niceties until he told her something, anything—he didn't like his aunt, the good woman who had saved him, or that he sometimes ate his peanut butter and jelly with two sides of peanut butter. After having garnered this information she ran around the tennis courts screaming, "Evans doesn't love his mom! Evans doesn't eat Jelly!" and Evans would blanch, his entire face draining away, until Roy came over, patted him on the back and told Inez to back off. He was Evans' hero but Roy and Inez were in cahoots, the two sharing sidelong glances, protecting each other and throwing Evans out front. If the teacher caught Roy cheating Inez would pipe up and say that Evans had engineered it. If Inez hadn't practiced her clarinet Roy would say that Evans had needed tutoring all week and Inez just didn't have time. Evans never could step around their games.

Once, when Evans was very young, he had called his Aunt, "Mommy" by mistake. Her eyes had gone wide and she smacked his diapered bottom with a wooden spoon. "I'm not your mother! She died. Got that? Your mother, your mother the whore, the hag, is dead! Am I dead? Am I a whore? Your mother is dead." She straightened up and looked at him, one hand on her hip. "You probably should have gone with her. You won't live out the year, I bet." She cuffed him on the head to make sure he got the message and then went back to cleaning.

His Aunt Muriel and Uncle Johnny lived in Texas, not near a city but near enough so that sometimes, on special nights, the search lights would reach up into the sky, circling round and round and Uncle Johnny would take him outside to watch them. His Uncle called the lights angels but Evans would always see them as the only Aurora Borealis that Texas could muster up.

As a baby Evans was inquisitive, full of smiles. Muriel disapproved of this behavior because she thought it meant he was addle brained. She liked to keep things in order and a smiling, addle brained child made that much harder. She felt the pain of every day living pressing on her like the sky above, and Evan's arrival confirmed that she would never rest until she was dead. She had been brought up Catholic by a father who stressed the importance of misery, and then beat her with his belt if her voice rose above a certain octave that he deemed both too excited and too feminine. She didn't resent her father for that because she felt it made her stronger; she thought the women who wore frilly skirts were base and destined for hell. Her sister

in law, Geraldine, where all the trouble started, didn't feel this way. Geraldine was a woman who wore pearls and stockings and drank wine from the bottle (it was a mystery to Geraldine what her brother saw in his Muriel). She would have been appalled to know that Muriel would eventually raise her only child, Evans.

The doctor who delivered Evans and killed his mother, by resecting the wrong blood vessels, didn't know how to break the news to her only kin—a brother who looked like he was about to nod off any second. The woman, Muriel, his wife, was scowling, her face broad and pock marked. So the Doctor said it wasn't his fault, the baby was ectopic and that it was the Lord's will that the mother die. Unless they wanted the child to go to an orphanage they would have to take him. The woman scowled again, but the man said, "We'll take him," just like that. His wife's eyes flared and she spit out a stream of obscenities against the dead mother. She was a whore and her son would come of no good. Their lives were quiet and they didn't need a child around, mucking things up. But the man just said again, "We'll take him." She split her lips into a thin line and never spoke to him about his decision again.

Evans was born on a Wednesday night. He was not expected. The doctor delivering him, who had eyes on the side of his head like ping pong balls, had thought Geraldine had a tumor which was pressing on her bladder and making her urinate every hour. They had discussed the procedure he wanted to do to remove the tumor—when she told him it hadn't been there six months before he insisted she have the surgery as soon as possible. Geraldine, though, had heard a story about someone dieing on the operating table and didn't want to have the procedure at all. It was only when she read in a magazine about a woman who had cancer spread all over her body that she decided to go for it. She waited till the Christmas holidays were over and then scheduled the surgery.

When the doctor cut into Geraldine and saw what was inside her, a small foot and the round curve of a bottom, he at first thought it was an alien—it was 1948 and these things could happen. The nurse beside him gasped, "It's a baby!" and he at once felt very foolish.

But he had no training with obstetrics and so after removing the infant, who was a little premature but over all healthy, he looked into the woman on the operating table, saw the placenta, and decided to remove that too. After all, didn't that normally come out? But as soon as he made a couple incisions the blood poured out in torrents, filling up the cavities in her body and spilling out onto the table like some sort of biblical tide. He

panicked, hastened to clamp the bleeders, but it was too late. Geraldine died without seeing her son, without even knowing she had one.

Geraldine was a large woman, many years past her prime, with eyes that folded in on themselves and seemed like tinted glass—she could see out but no one could see in. She was the type of woman who did not count her periods or her silverware, and did not pull her panty hose back up when it sagged at her ankles. She kept white begonias in her windowsill, but her cat also used the planters as a litter box. Her husband had died years and years ago, so many that she had forgotten what he looked like. She had a neighbor two floors down from her who was single and suicidal. After months of debating the idea she knocked on his door with a bottle of white wine and tried to cheer him up. He agreed, surprised but unable to say no to a woman who just came in the door like that, wanting sex. In the middle of things it struck him that sex was supposed to be an act of love and that this was as close as he would ever get. He started crying and Geraldine realized she hated men who cried. After she went back up to her apartment she forgot the crying bit and only remembered the nice parts, so she went back several times. Each time he would start crying and she would leave in disgust. This continued for two months and then he died from choking on the cap of a ball point pen, by accident. Everyone assumed he meant to do it but in the end he was just as terrified of death as it was of him.

When Evans was born he felt the weight of the Inuit's words, and when he died he felt the lift of them. Looking up into the sky that night, listening to the dead souls playing ball, seeing the ease with which one soul entered a body and then left to join friends in the sky—it seemed to Evans that he should not have been born at all. His mother, Geraldine, should not have gotten the surgery. If she hadn't tried to remove what she thought was a tumor his infant heart would have stopped beating. His body would have been covered in layers and layers of calcium, of bone, ossifying him, cocooning him so that his decaying flesh didn't harm Geraldine's, until he became nothing more than a hard rock she could carry with her always. At least then it would have been the two of them, a symbiotic partnership, where she didn't have to die and he didn't have to live.